Promising Military Career Ended by Spanish Flu

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Judge C.F.H. Carrithers (1854-1933) was a well-known Fairbury attorney and Livingston County Judge. He married Louise Marie Brydia (1854-1893) and moved from Saunemin to Fairbury. Their first child, Ralph Carrithers, died at ten months of age. Their second child, Truman William Carrithers, was born in 1882.

Truman W. Carrithers attended Fairbury schools and graduated with the class of 1898. Other class members included Addie Lytle, Lettie Stuckey, Herbert Stafford, Jessie Epstein, Clara Powell, and Lloyd Dancey. Truman was only 15 years old when he graduated from high school.

Truman was then nominated by Congressman Walter Reeves and appointed by President William McKinley to West Point. Truman entered West Point in June of 1899 and was the youngest member of that class. A roommate of Truman Carrithers at West Point was Douglas MacArthur. Mr. MacArthur became one of the most famous generals of World War II in the Pacific Theater. General MacArthur graduated with Truman Carrithers in the class of 1903. Truman received his commission as a second lieutenant seven weeks before he had his 21st birthday. After graduating from West Point, Truman married Miss Hope Donley from Peoria.

Truman's first assignment was to the 20th Infantry at Fort Sheridan. In December, the 20th Infantry was ordered to the Philippine Islands and took station in Manila. After a year in Manila and six months at Fort William McKinley, he was sent to Southern Mindanao in July 1905, serving at Cotobato, Reigne Regente, and Fort Pikit. He was made Battalion Quartermaster before returning to the States in the spring of 1906.

The regiment had just reached its home station, Monterey, California when the great earthquake and fire occurred in San Francisco. As Quartermaster, he took a wagon train loaded with supplies overland to San Francisco. Upon his arrival, he entered with indefatigable energy upon the task of relief, constantly working for eighty hours without sleep.

The regiment ultimately returned to Monterey, where he was the assistant to the Quartermaster until the regiment was again ordered to the Philippines. Three months later, he was promoted to the grade of First Lieutenant and ordered to join the 29th Infantry in New York at Fort Niagara.

After one year at Fort Niagara, Truman was sent to Evansville, Indiana, as a district recruiting officer. He served in that capacity for two years. His district placed fourth in the United States in the number of accepted recruits.

In March 1913, he joined the 22nd Infantry at Texas City. A year later, he was sent to Fort Sam Houston and was Post Adjutant for a year and a half. In September 1915, he rejoined his regiment at Douglas, Arizona, remaining only a month when he was ordered to the 29th Infantry at Panama.

In 1916, he was promoted to the grade of Captain, joined the newly organized 33rd Infantry at Gatun, and later was appointed post adjutant. He was promoted to major in that regiment in 1917 and was the commanding officer for a short time.

In the spring of 1918, he was selected by a board of general officers for duty on the general staff and ordered to Washington, DC. He was assigned to duty with the legislative branch of the general staff at the Army War College and, while serving there, was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Truman told his friends that the keenest disappointment of his life was that he could not be assigned to overseas duty and participate in the active fighting of World War I. The military officials thought his skills and experience would better serve the country by being assigned to Washington.

Unfortunately, Truman contracted the Spanish Flu in 1918 and died ten days later. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Truman was just 36 years of age when he died.

Lieutenant Colonel Truman Carrithers and his wife Hope had one child, Truman William Carrithers Jr. He was born in 1907 when his father was stationed in California. Truman Carrithers Jr. attended and graduated from West Point in 1930, like his father.

After graduation in 1930, Truman Carrithers Jr. was assigned to the Field Artillery, where he was a Second Lieutenant with the 18th Field Artillery at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. His first marriage was to Carol Hick, born January 31, 1915, in Hobart, Oklahoma. In 1942, he retired from the United States Army after attaining the rank of Captain. In 1943, he married Mrs. Elizabeth Kislingbury Hanna Adams (1901-1987). She was known as Beth Beri, who was a Ziegfeld Showgirl. Truman Carrithers Jr. held various jobs after he retired from the military. He died in 1981 at the age of 74. There was no memorial service at his request, and his body was donated to the Medical College of the University of California in San Francisco for research purposes.

Many of the famous generals of World War II graduated from West Point in the same era that Lieutenant Colonel Truman Carrithers did. General MacArthur graduated in 1903, the same year as Lieutenant Colonel Carrithers. General Patton graduated from West Point in 1909, and General Eisenhower graduated in 1915. It is interesting to speculate whether or not Truman Carrithers could have become a famous World War II general if the Spanish Flu had not prematurely ended his military career in 1918.

Photo of Truman Carrithers (1882-1918). He was a Fairbury native and had a promising military career until he died from the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918.